

Approaches to E-Learning

Susanne Akrawi Hartvig¹ and Eva Petersson Brooks²

¹ Centre for Design, Learning and Innovation, Department of Learning and Philosophy,
Aalborg University Esbjerg, Niels Bohrs Vej 8,
6700 Esbjerg, Denmark
sah@learning.aau.dk

² Centre for Design, Learning and Innovation, Department of Architecture and Media
Technology, Aalborg University Esbjerg, Niels Bohrs Vej 8,
6700 Esbjerg, Denmark
ep@create.aau.dk

Abstract. E-learning has made its entrance into educational institutions. Compared to traditional learning methods, e-learning has the benefit of enabling educational institutions to attract more students. E-learning not only opens up for an increased enrollment, it also gives students who would otherwise not be able to take the education to now get the possibility to do so. This paper introduces Axel Honneth's theory on the need for recognition as a framework to understand the role and function of interaction in relation to e-learning. The paper argues that an increased focus on the dialectic relationship between recognition and learning will enable an optimization of the learning conditions and the interactive affordances targeting students under e-learning programs. The paper concludes that the engagement and motivation to learn are not only influenced by but depending on recognition.

Keywords: e-learning, interaction, dialectic relationship, recognition.

1 Introduction

The information and computing technology plays an increasing role in the society today and challenges the traditional understanding of teaching and learning [1]. With the use of information and computing technology the learning environment has changed. Traditionally, the learning environment was associated with auditoriums, classrooms and textbooks. Today, the Internet and the wireless network make it possible for learning to take place at any place and at any time [1, 2]. This opens up for new ways of teaching where e-learning can play a smaller or bigger role.

The main reasons for implementing e-learning are economic, geographical and technological circumstances [3]. E-learning has the benefit of enabling educational institutions to reach more students. Compared to traditional learning methods where time and space confine the enrollment of students, e-learning does not have these limits. Therefore e-learning gives students who would otherwise not be able to take the education to now get the possibility to do so [4]. Due to the opportunities created

by e-learning, many people are now attracted to training and education who would not have before considered it possible or even relevant to their lives [1].

Looking at the disadvantage on the other hand, e-learning moves the teaching and learning from the classroom to online interaction and thereby removes the possibilities that physical presence - the face-to-face interaction between the teacher and the students - offer. Especially when it comes to social and healthcare education this can be seen as a challenge. Traditionally these schools have developed the students' personal qualities developed in dealings with other people. Therefore, with the change from traditional classroom teaching to distance learning new challenges and questions arise.

Wertsch [5, 6] emphasises the mediating role of tools as communication resources, shaping social interaction and influencing the knowledge being conveyed. Hence, e-learning can be considered as a mediating process. Petersson [7] defines this process as a semiotic interplay bridging guided interaction and individual actions.

This semiotic interplay illustrates a holistic overview of a complex situation focused upon qualities integral to the design of e-learning experiences leading to desired learning process and outcome. The learning within and the design of e-learning situations constitute a situated activity with inherent actions and interventions [7, 8].

According to Monty et al. [9] e-learning should not be seen as a new tool but as a new context of learning. It is not necessarily meaningful to use traditional teaching materials or methods and apply them to e-learning. There is a need of a rethinking of the learning design based on the new context. Only in this way, it is possible to take advantage of the new possibilities e-learning that gives [9]. The new context demands a rethinking of how to teach online. There are several reasons for that. Studies show that it is not possible to achieve successful teaching online by using teaching methods that we normally use. The teaching must be based on the possibilities for active interaction and dialogue between the students and the educators where learning is something students engage in creating. By e-learning technology it is possible to learn by creating contacts and seek network (connectivity) and enter into these communities. But it demands that online education is organized in such a way that the students can use the possibilities. Secondly there are changes in the society which demands that the students develop new methods concerning how to deal/act [9]. But when dealing with the challenges of using e-learning it must be relevant to investigate how we learn as individuals. What is central for us as humans if we should be able to learn? What are the preconditions that need to be met to be able to achieve learning and development? The theory of recognition by Axel Honneth [10, 11] offers a realm of understanding that brings new perspective to the context of learning and e-learning. His basic assumption is that recognition is a precondition that must be met to be able to learn and develop as individuals. Based on the theory of recognition this article sets forth a new focus on the emergence of recognition as fundamental in e-learning contexts. By focusing on recognition it becomes decisive how it is experienced and achieved.

This paper presents a new approach to e-learning by presenting the theory of recognition by Axel Honneth [10, 11] focusing on aspects that appear relevant for e-learning design. This will demonstrate the firm basis of the theory and also point out its views on different kinds of recognition and spheres and how these play an

important role when dealing with (e-)learning. Finally the article will suggest central research questions and topics for future work with the theory of recognition as basis.

2 Axel Honneth's Theory: The Struggle for Recognition

With the theory of recognition Axel Honneth outlines an approach that is both highly original and firmly rooted in the history of modern social theory. Honneth situates his project within the tradition that emphasizes not the struggle for self-preservation but rather the struggle for establishment of relations of mutual recognition as a precondition for self-realization [12].

Inspired by Hegel and his model of the struggle for recognition and George Herbert Mead and his naturalistic pragmatism, Honneth builds his theory on social relationships as central to the development and maintenance of our identity as human beings. The connection between social patterns of recognition and individual prerequisites for self-realization is the ground on which Honneth develops his framework for interpreting social struggles. Well-established, ethical relations are essential for humans in order to be able to flourish.

2.1 An Overview

Relationships of mutual recognition are essential because they are crucial for our development as individuals – and our ability for sensing, interpreting, and realizing our needs and desires. We develop three modes of relating practically to one self: Self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. Honneth argues that to be able to relate to one in these ways involves recognition from others.

Honneth distinguish between three different kinds of relationships where recognition is needed:

- Close relations of love and friendship
- Legally institutionalized relations of universal respect for the autonomy and dignity of persons
- Networks of solidarity and shared values within which the particular worth of members of a community can be acknowledged [10, 11]

These relationships must be established through social struggles for recognition since they are not historically given. It is in these relationships that self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem are being developed.

2.2 Love and Self-confidence

Self-confidence is the basic relation to oneself that is developed in relationships of love and friendship. Our first relationships to others are decisive for our development of the capacity to express needs and desires without fear of being abandoned as a result. Honneth uses the object-relations theory of early childhood experience in which interactive relationships are necessary for the development of children [10, 11, 12].

2.3 Rights and Self-respect

Honneth connects the development of self-respect with the recognition of being a morally responsible agent. Honneth draws on Immanuel Kant's view that every person has the right to be recognized and respected as capable of acting on the basis of reasons and therefore also capable of participating in public deliberation [10, 11].

When it comes to self-respect being accorded legal rights are crucial. Rights give the opportunity to assert claims, and defend the rights you have been given. If the fullest form of self-respecting should be realized, one needs to be recognized as possessing the capacities of being a legal person and morally responsible agent [10, 11].

2.4 Solidarity and Self-esteem

With self-esteem one has the sense of being irreplaceable and having something of value to offer. Honneth agrees with Mead claiming that one needs to know that one does better than others to be able to distinguish oneself from others.

Honneth, however, does not agree with the view that the division of labour in modern industrial societies allows all individuals to find their roles in which to excel. His argument is that cultural aspects play an important role when it comes to self-esteem [9]. The values of a particular culture determine what is and what is not considered as a significant contribution to the common good and what is not. This will determine which job functions, educations etc. that will convey a sense of personal accomplishment. Therefore, what is counted as a contribution in a culture is decisive for individuals' opportunities for self-esteem. With this view it is possible to conceive the conditions for self-esteem as a field of cultural struggle for the recognition of previously denigrated contributors to the common good.

Honneth connects self-esteem with solidarity, which should be understood as the cultural climate in which it is possible to acquire self-esteem. According to Honneth we can only use the term solidarity when some shared concern, value or interest are present [13].

The term 'solidarity' is contingent since the values of a society vary. Which particular values that are approved depend on the social and cultural struggles. Struggles for recognition can be seen as attempts to change social patterns that denigrate individuals to a condition where individuals have real opportunities to acquire esteem. Not simply for being a member of a group but for being an individual contributing to a shared project.

The three dimensions of recognition, which have now been described, are the fundament of Honneth's normative theory of an ideal society where individuals have real opportunities to acquire self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. These dimensions of recognition are necessary for the full development of the identity of an individual. It is important to add that recognition in Honneth's perception must go both ways – meaning that recognition must come from someone whom one recognizes [10, 11].

3 Recognition and Learning

Based on the theory of recognition we achieve a new approach to learning where recognition goes ahead of learning and development. The dialectic relationship

between recognition and learning makes it essential to focus not only on learning methods and styles but also on recognition as the foundation in any learning environment.

First, Honneth's theoretical distinction between three spheres where recognition is needed contributes with a general focus not only on the student in a formal learning situation but on the student as a social individual with experiences of recognition and a way of relating to one self that influence her preconditions of learning.

Recognition in the sphere of solidarity including experiences in educational institutions becomes important since the recognition offered here influences the students learning and development. The student must be given opportunities to achieve recognition because of his or her particular qualities; to sense that (s)he has something of value to offer the community.

In order to be able to offer students an experience of recognition in learning environments it is important to investigate what the experience of recognition requires. Both in relation to the society in general to assert which values are approved today and in relation to the specific learning context. The concept of recognition gives a deeper understanding of, and focus on, the individual as unique and thereby a recognition of their diverse qualities, competences and ways of learning.

Just as the movement of learning from traditional classroom teaching to distance learning demands new learning methods that are based on the new learning context, there is a need to focus on recognition in relation to this new context as well. In other words, how can recognition be taken from the classroom – the physical presence – into an unlimited room independent of time and place?

4 Future Work

What Honneth offers is a realm of understanding to study how we learn and develop as individuals. Focusing on the dialectic relationship between recognition and learning offer possibilities for enabling an optimization of learning conditions targeting students under e-learning programs. Consequently, in conclusion, the engagement, interest and motivation to learn are not only influenced by, but depending on, recognition. To understand and address these dependencies in the context of e-learning, a study will be implemented including students from a Danish distance education within the social and health sector (high school level). The study will apply a micro-development and process-oriented approach to identify possible links between recognition and learning.

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